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**Testimony**  
**Before the Committee on Resources**  
**United States House of Representatives**

**Hearing on H.R. 5539, the North American Wetlands Conservation Reauthorization Act**  
**June 29, 2006**

Mr. Chairman and members of the Committee, I appreciate this opportunity to present The Nature Conservancy's testimony on H.R. 5539, the North American Wetlands Conservation Reauthorization Act. My name is Steve Parker and I am the Director of the Conservancy's Virginia Coast Preserve. The Nature Conservancy strongly supports H.R. 5539 and urges the Committee to favorably report this legislation to the House.

The Nature Conservancy is an international, non-profit organization dedicated to the conservation of biological diversity. Our mission is to preserve the plants, animals and natural communities that represent the diversity of life on Earth by protecting the lands and waters they need to survive. Our on-the-ground conservation work is carried out in all 50 states and in 30 foreign countries and is supported by approximately one million individual members. We have helped conserve nearly 15 million acres of land in the United States and Canada and more than 102 million acres with local partner organizations globally.

The Nature Conservancy appreciates the opportunity to testify before the Subcommittee on the North American Wetlands Conservation Reauthorization Act. The original legislation, the North American Wetlands Conservation Act, established one of this nation's premier habitat conservation programs and has produced benefits for people and wildlife of the United States and the adjacent countries of Canada and Mexico. Since 1990, over \$700 million in federal grant funds has leveraged more than three times as many partner dollars to accomplish conservation actions over almost 23 million acres. All of this work has been done in close collaboration with hundreds of conservation partners, including private land owners, state and federal agencies, and private non-profit organizations. We commend Congress for its foresight in creating NAWCA in 1989 and repeatedly taking action to ensure the long-term success of this important program.

The creation of this program almost 17 years ago was a bipartisan effort and NAWCA has consistently attracted strong support in Congress. In recent years, Representatives John Dingell and Curt Weldon have been joined by over 200 Members of the House in favor of increased funding for NAWCA. The co-signers of their letter include many members of the Committee on Resources. The Senate has also provided bipartisan support and recognition of the program's success and bipartisan support for NAWCA. Earlier this year, Senators Mike Crapo and Blanche Lincoln circulated a letter of support for NAWCA funding that was signed by 65 Senators. This level of Congressional support is a testament to NAWCA's unique ability to foster public-private partnerships in a cost-effective and results-oriented manner.

The Act has had a primary focus on protecting wetland habitats and the migratory waterfowl that use them. These areas also teem with other species of birds and wetland-associated wildlife, all of which are also protected by the conservation activities spurred by the Act. Wetlands are some of the most diverse habitats to be found in North America and they attract not only numerous species of birds, but also numerous wildlife users, including hunters, birders, and those whose only goal is to admire the wildlife spectacle.

NAWCA has provided critically important protection for wetland habitats that sustain such popular waterfowl species as the Mallard, Black Duck, and Northern Pintail. And, the same areas protected with NAWCA funding also harbor important populations of wetland-associated birds that are sought after or beloved by wildlife watchers across the country. Examples of these

include the Seaside Sparrow, found in salt marshes along our Atlantic and Gulf coasts (including right here in Maryland and Virginia); the American Bittern, a cryptic species of heron whose unique call is heard in freshwater marshes around the country; and the Black Oystercatcher, a unique shorebird found on the Pacific coast.

NAWCA has provided innovative conservation leadership by recognizing that migratory wildlife neither follow nor understand political boundaries. Both the hunting and bird conservation communities have long been aware of the fact that numerous migratory species nest in one country at one time of the year and spend the winter in another country. Therefore, without coordinated conservation at all the sites used by these species, our efforts will fail and the money spent on conservation in one place may well be wasted. The recognition of this by NAWCA has resulted in extraordinary habitat protection accomplishments in Canada, where many of the species that we depend upon here in the U.S. raise their young. Equally important have been NAWCA's conservation results in Mexico, where a great many migratory bird species spend the winter. Without these continued conservation investments outside the United States, we will be guaranteed shorter, less productive hunting seasons and shorter daily lists for the birding public. This vision of multi-national, coordinated conservation was ahead of its time and has spurred increasing activity in all three countries to build on this successful model and accomplish similar goals for all bird species.

A clear component of NAWCA's success has been its stimulation of partnerships to accomplish broader conservation goals. For all birds, including waterfowl, landbirds, shorebirds, and waterbirds, conservation can only be accomplished with many partners working together across broad geographic areas. By specifically requiring matching dollars and rewarding grantees based on the number of partners, NAWCA has caused new partners to work together, created partnerships among a broad array of types of individuals and agencies, and established the basis for long-term conservation to continue long after the federal funds are gone. This is the true essence of conservation as envisioned by Congress when it enacted NAWCA and forms the basis for the future of bird conservation in North America.

The Conservancy has been an active participant in the NAWCA program since its inception. Numerous Conservancy chapters across the United States have participated in partnerships to implement conservation activities funded by NAWCA, both as a grantee and as a match provider. In addition, the Conservancy serves on the North American Wetlands Conservation Council, the body that recommends projects for NAWCA funding. We have devoted significant staff time to this effort over the years in recognition of NAWCA's importance for our work and for wetland conservation.

Turning now to the landscape I call home, let me speak briefly about the importance of the NAWCA program to The Nature Conservancy's work on the Eastern Shore of Virginia. The Eastern Shore is a narrow finger of land that separates the Chesapeake Bay from the Atlantic Ocean. It is home to the longest expanse of remaining coastal wilderness on the eastern seaboard of the United States. Situated at the lower end of the Delmarva Peninsula, the Eastern Shore is one of the most important migratory bird stopover sites on Earth. Using a collaborative, locally-based approach, the Conservancy's Virginia Coast Reserve (VCR) office has been working to protect this unique and valuable landscape for over three decades. To date we have conserved

over 40,000 acres of land, most notably 14 undeveloped barrier islands, but also thousands of acres of pristine salt marshes, vast tidal mudflats, shallow bays, and productive forested uplands.

NAWCA funding has provided critical support for our land conservation and restoration work. Before touching briefly on some of this work, let me first state that key components of the NAWCA program – partnerships and matching funding – are well reflected in these efforts. While the Conservancy has often played a leading role, our work on the Eastern Shore would not be possible without our partners – including the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, the Virginia Department of Conservation and Recreation, the Virginia Department of Game and Inland Fisheries, a local land trust, and numerous landowners – all of whom have joined us on NAWCA projects. Thanks to contributions from these partners, we have matched the NAWCA investment with more than twice as much in non-federal funds.

Let me share a few brief highlights from some of our NAWCA projects. In 2004, the Conservancy received \$1 million in NAWCA funds for the *Accomack County Habitat Protection Initiative*. When this grant was completed, it boasted the following accomplishments:

- Protection of 3,889 acres of coastal wetlands, including 3,500 acres of declining wetland types.
- Protection of 252 acres of coastal forests and shrub-scrub habitats.
- Protection of 36 miles of riparian and shoreline habitat, including 23.6 miles of stream frontage and over 7 miles of high energy beach shoreline and associated dune system habitat.
- Protection of valuable habitat for seven threatened and endangered species and more than 30 species of concern.
- Protection of critically important habitat for numerous species of resident and migratory birds, including, at minimum 11 priority birds of the North American Bird Conservation Initiative (BCR 30), 11 NAWCA priority waterfowl species, 8 National Shorebird priority species, and 28 Partners in Flight priority or Watch List species.
- Protection of spawning, nursery, and/or feeding habitat for at least 24 species of fish, in addition to blue crabs, hard clams, and oysters.
- Protection of water quality and associated near shore habitats, including beds of submerged aquatic vegetation in the Chesapeake Bay.

Please note that all lands referenced as protected are protected permanently, either through perpetual conservation easements or fee simple ownership.

The Conservancy and its partners were also awarded in 2004 approximately \$980,000 for the Southern Tip Ecological Partnership (or STEP) project to protect 1,956 acres of land through conservation easements and restore and enhance another 594 of habitat for migratory birds associated with wetland, riparian, and upland coastal habitats at the southern tip of the Eastern Shore. This project is one of the first cooperative efforts toward large-scale land protection and habitat restoration on Virginia's Eastern Shore, and is extremely important to ensure that the Eastern Shore continues to provide critical resting and feeding habitat for migratory birds.

At the most basic and fundamental level, these two NAWCA projects represent two key strategies of The Nature Conservancy's conservation efforts on the Eastern Shore. The

*Accomack County Habitat Protection Initiative* represents the first strategy - protect key natural areas and wildlife habitats through easements and acquisitions to prevent further declines in migratory bird habitat. The STEP project represents the second strategy – restore key habitats such as high marsh, emergent wetlands, and upland forest to offset the current shortage, and continued loss, of critical migratory bird habitat. The Nature Conservancy cannot achieve conservation success on the Eastern Shore by pursuing one strategy alone. Both approaches are necessary to secure lasting and meaningful conservation results, and the NAWCA program provides one of the best funding sources to support this kind of work.

Before concluding, I would be remiss if I did not point out that the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, one of our most important partners on the Eastern Shore, recently received a NAWCA grant that will be vital to its acquisition of the Bull's Pond tract, adjacent to the Eastern Shore of Virginia National Wildlife Refuge. Protection of this tract will add to the size of the refuge and will help ensure that the vast numbers of birds that congregate here on annual migrations have places to land and food for the journey.

Lastly, least you think me too parochial (and the Eastern Shore is a place where it is still easy to forget the outside world), it is worth noting the NAWCA is playing a key role in conservation efforts to our immediate north and south. For example, in October 2001, Virginia and North Carolina signed a pact to work together to restore the Albemarle and Pamlico Sounds by improving water quality and restoring wildlife habitats throughout the watersheds. This pact was the first major step toward fulfilling the goal of these two states to work across political boundaries to restore the quality of the coastal environment for wildlife and people. Between 2002-2006, eight conservation agencies and two cities in Virginia and North Carolina partnered with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, The Nature Conservancy, Ducks Unlimited, International Paper, Virginia Dominion Power and 30 other companies, non-government organizations, and private individuals to accomplish over 47,000 acres of habitat work through the NAWCA program. Completed projects provide habitat along key migratory bird flyways and support over 30 rare federal and state listed species from the Pamlico Sound, west to the Great Dismal Swamp and throughout the Roanoke, North Landing, and Nottoway River watersheds of North Carolina and Virginia. The successes of these landscape-level partnership efforts have encouraged others to join in, or develop similar habitat partnerships along the Mid-Atlantic. Similarly impressive results can be found to our north in Maryland, where a new effort along the Pocomoke River unites the Maryland Department of Natural Resources, the Conservancy, and local partners to protect and restore important floodplain forests.

In summary, Mr. Chairman and members of the committee, the NAWCA grants program achieves the sort of results we can all be proud of – it unites partners, serves as a catalyst for matching funds that leverage federal investments, and most importantly protects and restores critical habitats for ducks, songbirds, and other wetland dependent wildlife.

Thank you for the opportunity to address the committee and share some of my thoughts on this incredibly valuable tool for conservation.